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"It's Just a Game"—
Ethical Reasoning within Virtual Worlds

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Abstract

“How do Boston-area youth (15–25) reason about ethical dilemmas occurring within virtual worlds such as ‘World of Warcraft’?”; and “Which considerations seem to shape their ethical responses?” In semi-structured interviews 27 young people were presented with an ethical dilemma: subjects were asked to imagine that they had been playing an online multiplayer game of around 30,000 players for two weeks. Within the imagined game, they are asked whether or not they would join their online friends in selling “Pseudogems”—worthless items that are thought to be valuable by new players—to others in the gameworld. The responses of our participants suggest that most young people (13 of 27) would sell the gems, while 8 would not, with 6 giving a mixed response. The interviews reveal that, of the participants who would sell the gems, the driving reason is the fact that neither the gems nor the currency is “real”, and that the transactions are “only a game”. Analysis of this perspective, and competing viewpoints from other participants, provides a new set of considerations for those wishing to encourage ethical behavior among youth online.

Introduction

Consider the following question: would you sell an object to another person which, although they perceive it to be valuable, is really valueless? Most people, perhaps, running a quick moral simulation, would reply that they would not. But what if you were encouraged by friends, who have been successfully selling such items for a large profit over a long period of time? This might alter the answer for a few. But many, one might think, would remain convinced there is something wrong in taking advantage of another's ignorance in this way.

Would it change your mind, though, if the object in question, the currency involved in the transaction, your avatar, those of your friends, and of the potential buyer, were all virtual, fabrications of a digital world? How do the ethical considerations play out now, in the environment of a massively multiplayer online game (MMO)? These are the questions which this study investigates: how do 27 young people, aged 15–25, reason about questions of ethics within virtual worlds, and what might this tell us about their ethical reasoning more generally?

MMOs—A Brief Introduction, and Why They Matter for Youth

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMO) are games, played on a video game console or a home computer, in which hundreds, thousands or millions of players interact with each other in a persistent online space which continues to exist even when a particular player is not playing (Bartle 2003; Jakobsson 2006, Zackariasson 2007). Such games come in many genres, from science fiction themed combat games like *PlanetSide* to fantasy themed "role playing" games—games in which players take the role of a character and, through the completion of tasks within the world, build that character's skills and abilities—like the hugely popular *World of Warcraft*.

It is estimated that the top five MMOs (World of Warcraft, Aion, Lineage, Lineage II and Runescape) have a combined subscriber base of 17.7 million players (MMOData, 2010). When combined with the numbers for less successful games, it is clear that more than 20 million people worldwide currently play some form of MMO, and that this number is steadily growing (although there is some difficulty in accurately the number of individuals who play MMOs).

This user-base includes large numbers of young people, who frequently spend much of their time playing. The Daedalus Project, a 10-year investigation into the psychology of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (a hugely popular subset of MMOs dubbed MMORPGs) suggests that almost 45% of male MMORPG players, and 20% of female players, are between the ages of 12 and 22 (Yee, 2003). These younger players spend, on average, approximately 23 hours per week in the gameworld (Yee, 2005, Cole and Griffiths, 2007). Therefore, for some youth, almost one whole day in every seven is spent interacting with others through an MMO.

MMOs are also highly social experiences, in which players not only compete with others but also cooperate to achieve shared goals, speak with each other (through text or voice-chat systems), trade items or virtual currency, and negotiate over the division of the spoils of victory. Cole and Griffiths (2007), in a survey of 912 self-selected MMO players from around the world, suggest that approximately three quarters of gamers make good friends through MMOs (with the mean number of friends being 7), with almost half considering their online friendships comparable to their real-life friends. A significant minority (39.3%) "said they discussed sensitive issues with their online gaming friends that they would not discuss with their real life friends" (p. 579).

The large number of youth playing MMOs, the many long hours youth spend within them, and their potential for significant social interaction mark MMOs as spaces of particular interest to social scientists wishing to understand the nature of young people's ethical thinking. Further, parents and educators—both those who use virtual spaces in their teaching, and those who teach students who engage in these spaces at home—have a need for greater knowledge of this emerging space. For, as the next section demonstrates, interactions between players in massively multiplayer online environments can carry significant ethical weight, and players' actions carry the potential to harm others.

Ethics and MMOs—Literature Review

The ethical questions raised by the interactions between people in online worlds have already spawned lively debate, despite the relative newness of widespread participation in such worlds. Much of this debate has focused on the philosophical questions of whether there is in fact potential for harm regarding actions in a virtual community, and what constitutes ethical or unethical action when digital avatars are interacting with other digital avatars or trading virtual goods.

Huff, Johnson and Miller (2003), in an early article exploring these issues, investigate a 1993 "rape" within LambdaMOO, one of the first MMOs and the oldest still running. The authors argue that "Virtual behavior can have effects both on virtual characters and on flesh persons" (p. 15), noting that players strongly identify with their online avatars and therefore can feel violated (as in the case of the LambdaMOO "rape") when their avatars are subjected to unwanted activity. Therefore, "The more invested a flesh controller, the more damaging virtual violence can be" (p. 17). This, they argue, means that "The controllers of virtual characters have responsibilities for

those consequences. These responsibilities are similar to those that real people have when they interact with other real people" (p. 17).

Similarly, Wolfendale (2006) argues that MMO players' attachments to their online avatars are a significant aspect of identity expression and therefore morally salient. Unlike emotional attachments to imaginary friends or fictional characters, Wolfendale suggests, "Avatar attachment is expressive of identity and self-conception and should therefore be accorded the moral significance we give to real-life attachments that play a similar role" (p. 112). Simply suggesting that players remember that the MOO is "just a game" fails to recognize the scope for identification with an avatar that exists in such spaces.

Powers (2004), in an influential essay also exploring the LambdaMOO "rape", has been taken as disagreeing with this stance, however. Powers mobilizes speech act theory to demonstrate that "it is possible to have real moral wrongs in virtual communities" (p. 191) but suggests that a crucial aspect of the judgment of whether a real wrong has been committed is whether the moral expectations of the community have been violated. Individuals cannot be faulted for failing to live up to a set of moral expectations that are not shared by the community of which they are a part. In Powers' view, unlike LambdaMOO, in which a clear set of norms had emerged regarding what constitutes acceptable conduct,

> [modern MMOs] fit the general libertarian ideology of the internet; participation is a free choice, and offense does not count as harm. Minimal rules are established, and "fair play" is anything that falls within the rules… It is a reasonable expectation, upon signing up to play the game, that your avatar at some point will be abused, violated, dismembered and exterminated. (p. 197)

Therefore, since expectations of moral behavior have not emerged, "Role-playing games seem only to share features with a bizarre Hobbesian world, and hence must lack moral relations" (p. 198).

Many have taken issue with Powers' position. Wolfendale (2007), as mentioned above, contends that Powers underestimates the importance of the attachment between player and avatar, and therefore unnecessarily limits the range of potential harm that can be caused by virtual interactions. Reynolds (2007), responding directly to Powers, suggests that MMOs do in fact meet Powers' criteria for moral behavior, even though he claims they do not. Specifically, MMOs *have* frequently developed expectations of moral behavior—"there are many cases where it is very clear what a local norm is and that an individual has signaled their acceptance of that" (p. 9)—and therefore actions within them can have moral content. Likewise, Öqvist (2008) asserts:

> "In my view, there is no doubt that acts in virtual communities can have a real moral value. The key is to acknowledge that ethics and morality are social phenomena and that that the ways acts are mediated are irrelevant as long as they affect real human beings. Denying acts affecting real people moral value is wrong regardless of circumstance" (p. 5).

Finally, it is of interest to note that the debate regarding MMO ethics does not just occur within academic circles: players of MMOs, and members of other virtual communities, engage in (sometimes fiery) discussion over the rights and wrongs of particular acts within the games themselves, as well as on message boards, forums, blogs and gaming magazines.

The "assassination" of "EVE Online" avatar Mirial, and the theft of all her corporate assets[1], by other players within the game who had infiltrated her organization over the course of a year, is one example. Mirial had been such a prominent and successful character that her downfall was discussed well beyond the boundaries of the gameworld itself, even reaching the pages of UK print magazine PC Gamer (PC Gamer, 2005). This makes for a particularly interesting example, since the actions undertaken by the assassins were totally legitimate (and even encouraged) given the rules of the game, and yet some players still felt the actions were wrong. It is in this spirit that Viqer Fell, another player, says "robbing the entire corps assets thereby stealing from every pilot member is the act of losers. Contemptible" (PC Gamer, 2005).

It is fair to say, then, that it is the broad consensus of both the scholarly community and the community of MMO players that unethical actions, including ones which cause harm to others, *are* possible within online worlds. Indeed, as the example just provided demonstrates, MMOs may afford players opportunities to engage in types of ethical or unethical action they would never encounter offline. It is unlikely, for example, that any of the players responsible for Mirial's downfall have engaged in corporate espionage, or the attendant moral considerations that ensue, while not playing EVE Online. Therefore, understanding how young people make ethical decisions regarding their action in MMOs is critically important if we are at all concerned with the ethical development of youth.

This need will only grow as video games become the dominant form of entertainment media among young people. In 2009 revenue from video game sales surpassed that from film (both cinema and DVD purchases) in the UK (Wallop, 2009). In the same year market research organization NPD reported that " 63 per cent of Americans—almost two out of three—have

[1] Players in EVE Online can build large corporations in collaboration with other players

played a game in the last six months, compared to 53 per cent of consumers who reported going to the movies" (Reynolds, 2009). There is every indication that the market for video games will continue to increase, and with the spread of online access across the globe (including access through mobile devices), we can safely predict that MMO usage will become an ever more prevalent part of youth culture.

It is perhaps fortunate, then, that there are growing efforts to harness the affordances of virtual worlds in order to develop ethical thinking in young people. Indeed, a whole new field of scholarly enquiry is arising to investigate the implications of this endeavor (see Schrier and Gibson, eds. 2010 for many examples). Koo and Seider (2009) argue that, in contrast to literature and film, "video games are unique...in the multiple levers through which they can influence the worldview, values, and behaviors of players" (p. 1). They identify three primary means by which video games can guide moral development: by acting as "message transmitters", as rule-governed "interactive systems", and as "social practices" in which players interact with each other (p. 4–9). Koo and Seider end by advocating more research into how video games can shape ethical thought and behavior, and this paper is part of that endeavor.

Further to these theoretical efforts, game designers are beginning to explicitly design games in order to promote ethical development. For example, Hodhod, Kudenko and Cairns (2009) have developed AEINS, “an inquiry-based learning environment, that helps 8–11 years old children to be engaged effectively in moral dilemmas” using a form of Socratic Dialogue (p. 3).

Thus far, however, few studies has investigated in-depth how youth might respond to ethical dilemmas within a virtual world. While philosophical analyses and surveys abound, interviews with digitally-engaged youth, focused on questions of ethics within an online game, have not

hitherto been conducted in a widespread manner. The study presented here takes a first step toward a more nuanced understanding of young people's decision-making in these increasingly important new digital spaces.

Methods

Our research team conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 27 young people (ages 15–25), themselves drawn from a larger group of 61 young people that comprise the subject pool in one segment of the GoodPlay project. These subjects were drawn from the Greater Boston Area, chosen for participation in the study based on responses to a screening survey which ascertained engagement with a number of online activities (social networking, gaming, blogging, and other forms of content creation such as creating YouTube movies). Subjects were selected due to their high levels of participation in at least one of these activities, and according to criteria designed to ensure a reasonably representative sample.

Of the 27 young people who are the subject of this study, five are drawn from one of three public high schools (ages 15–17), fourteen are of college age (ages 18–22) and eight are post-college (ages 23–25)[2]. Twelve subjects are male, fifteen female, and thirteen identify as white, fourteen non-white.

These young people were presented with the following dilemma:

> For the past two weeks, you've been playing an online multiplayer game that has about 30,000 members and it takes place in a 3D world. Yesterday you joined a club within the game and your fellow club members, none of whom you know offline, seem nice and they've given you a lot of game advice as well as some useful equipment for your character. Buying, selling and trading the equipment with other players is a fun and important part of the game.

[2] Ages at time of interview.

> But there are a few rules about trading and many exchanges don't always end well for some players. You've noticed, for example, that many of your clubmates brag to each other about taking advantage of new players by selling them these green rocks, called pseudogems, that are worthless—and they sell them for really high prices. After finding some pseudogems by doing a joint quest with two of your clubmates, you're invited by one of them to go to one of the towns in the game to try to sell the pseudogems to inexperienced players for a big profit.
>
> Would you go with your clubmates to the nearby town to sell the pseudogems?

Note how the dilemma is framed to emphasize the social pressure acting on the participant (their friends have "given you a lot of game advice as well as some useful equipment for your character") as well as the size of the profits players are making on "worthless" virtual items. Participants were then asked a series of questions designed to explore and clarify the reasoning behind their position.

In designing this (and other) dilemmas, we consciously drew on Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview (MJI, see Colby and Kohlberg, 1987), which presents interviewees with challenging ethical dilemmas and seeks to analyze the reasoning behind their judgments (but not to judge the final outcome of this process). Following Gilligan (1982), attempts were made to ensure that the dilemmas presented could feasibly be encountered by the subjects were they to actually play such a game.

Furthermore, questions were posed in such a way as to implicate subjects into the moral situation, ensuring they would not see themselves as a passive observer. Counter to the traditional Kohlbergian procedures, we stressed that subjects should consider what they themselves would actually do, were they faced with such a situation. To further engage the subjects in the dilemma, we asked "person-centered" questions about their individual

experiences online throughout the interviews. Finally, questions were designed to be gender neutral as far as possible, and we endeavored to balance the ratio of male to female subjects.

We were interested in both the reasoning behind the ethical and moral decisions made, *and* the decisions themselves. Rather than attempting to draw inferences from situations that may be remote from actual experience, we operate on the assumption that how young people think about participation in the digital sphere may make a difference to how they act when faced with similar situations in their lives. Thus we discuss below both the nature of the ethical reasoning our subjects display and the actual decisions they made.

Once administered and transcribed, the interviews were coded in line with other codes developed by the GoodPlay team (see GoodPlay, 2009 for further information).

Findings

To Sell or Not to Sell, That is the Question—The Decisions Participants Made

Participants' responses fell into three main categories: those who would certainly sell the pseudogems (13 participants), those who certainly would not (8 participants) and those who gave what we term a "mixed response", saying that in some situations they might sell the gems, and in others they would not (6 participants).

In exploring the participants' reasoning in response to the dilemma, we will first consider the answers of those who said they *would* sell the gems, then the answers of those who said they *would not* sell the gems. Finally, the reasoning of those who gave a "mixed" response will be considered.

Participants Who Would Sell the Gems

It's Just a Game…

Each of the thirteen participants who stated unequivocally that they would be willing to accompany their friends to the sale of the pseudogems referred, at least as part of their reasoning, to the fact that the game, the gems, or the currency was "not real". This argument took different forms for different participants. Archetypal examples include Melissa (21), who says "It's a video game, and I think that there's nothing wrong with taking advantage of new people playing a video game because it's a video game. And it's not real life. If it was real life, of course, I wouldn't do that", and Joan (19), who responded "[I would sell the gems], because…It's not real money. It's a game, it's make-believe… It's not like I'm taking someone's real money."

This argument was often reinforced by explicit references to the perceived lack of consequences attached to selling the gems for an inflated price. Joe (21), for instance, says "there's no real consequences of anything that happens. It's just for fun", while Adit (25) states "This I don't think has any consequences… I'd be unabashed in taking advantage of these people."

…and Games are Competitive…

Also prevalent among the gem-sellers was the perception that the MMO space was essentially competitive in nature. Of the ten respondents who took this "competitive" view, nine said they would sell the gems to another player for an inflated price. This sentiment was expressed clearly by Deejay (25), who said "Well, I guess it's a game, right? So you're trying to outdo each other", and Adit (25), who said simply "With games it's about winning."

…so, Caveat Emptor!

A third common strand of reasoning amongst the gem-selling participants was what might be termed a "caveat emptor" approach: that the responsibility was with the *buyer* to ascertain the real value of the goods on offer. Floyd, for instance, says "I don't think it's really cheating to sell the thing. It's pretty much logic and just understanding, reading. So, if the person probably read the guidelines, instructions, the rule, they would know."

This argument frequently coincided with the idea that new players had to learn the rules of the game, and that they should somehow expect to be taken advantage of by more experienced players unless they learn the tricks of the trade. Justin (20) expressed this clearly: "if I had fallen for the pseudogem trick before, then it's part of knowing the game. You learned that knowledge after messing up and buying them, and you have the right now to use that to get better at the game." Melissa puts this view particularly starkly, saying "Take advantage of the newbies, the newbs. There's nothing wrong with that. They decided to play the game, they need to learn their lesson." In the eyes of these participants, if the new players do *not* learn, then "they [are] gullible… it's kind of their fault", as Joan puts it.

Some players who made this argument seemed to feel they would actually be *benefitting* the buyer by selling them the pseudogems at an inflated price, because they would thereby be teaching them a valuable lesson. Monica (21) put this particularly clearly, saying "I shouldn't feel bad for you, you should have learned the rules of the game when you came in and paid more attention. I think it's better for them. They learn next time not to buy from someone." In total, eight players voiced some version of the "caveat emptor" position, and all eight would be willing to sell the gems.

Participants Who Would Not Sell the Gems

Among the eight participants who would *not* sell the pseudogems to unwitting players, 3 modes of response stand out. Since most subjects justified their stance by giving a number of reasons, some of these eight participants appear in more than one of the categories that follow.

Follow the Golden Rule

Five of these eight participants explicitly called on forms of the "golden rule", suggesting they would not be willing to sell the gems to others because they would not like to be sold the gems themselves. Danielle, for instance, says "I think that if I was new, I wouldn't want that to happen to me." Likewise Steve, who admitted to once having engaged in "something almost exactly the same" as the activity in the dilemma, said "I wouldn't do it again, because I've been in this situation since then, being on the other end where you get scammed rather than scamming people. And it may be fun for the person who is scamming people, but when you get scammed yourself, it is not fun."

Appeals to Fairness

Five of the non-sellers appealed to some concept of "fairness", expressing the idea that it is "unfair" to sell someone the gems, or that the other person is being "taken advantage of". It is in this spirit that Emma (16) states "I wouldn't take advantage of somebody that isn't, doesn't know what the deal is, what's going on or how things work… it's not fair to them", and Juan (25) adds "it's kind of screwing someone over from the start before they have a chance to know better."

The fairness position is intriguing because it is effectively the inverse of the "caveat emptor" position: the five respondents concerned with fairness feel that it is the responsibility of the seller to disclose relevant information about the items in question, and that not doing so is to take

advantage of another. Under this conception, the fact that other players are new and unsure as to the mechanics of the game acts as additional reason *not* to sell the gems, rather than as a reason to sell them.

Think of the Community!

Finally, three of the participants who would refuse to sell the gems (and four more participants who gave a mixed response) considered the effects of their actions on a wider community of players, thinking beyond the boundaries of the single transaction outlined in the dilemma. Of these seven, Sarah (23) was the most articulate:

> I would tell my friends I was going to tell [the potential buyer about the real value of the gems], and I would say, listen, like, we're all in this society together, but I think you're really not promoting a good, fair game, and what's the point in your gain if you cheated your way to it?

Here Sarah draws both on a principle of fairness and on the idea of a society that is "in this together". Likewise, Frank (23) says "if everyone begins to feel cheated, then it can have an impact on the community sense and community feel of the game".

These participants, while they all recognized the potential for harm in the individual transaction that is the focus of the dilemma, also felt that selling the gems at an inflated price could affect a much broader community of players, and they felt some responsibility to ensure that the community functioned well. This way of thinking through the dilemma can be seen as distinct to the competitive spirit which animates ten of the participants who *would* sell the gems.

Mixed Responses

Six participants gave a "mixed" response, in which they suggested that *in some circumstances* they might sell the gems, while in other circumstances they would not. In this section we will explore some of the contextual factors weighed by four of these six participants, since they demonstrate some of the nuances which come into play during ethical decision-making online which are not easily visible in survey responses, and problematize some of the more categorical responses made by other participants.

Kevin's (15 years old) response was instructive because it demonstrates how an individual's experience with other games, not just MMOs, can factor into thinking about the sort of situation presented in the dilemma. Kevin initially says "To me, that's just a game. I mean big deal, so what. It's not like you're ripping them off in real life. It's game money… And, to me, anything done in a game really doesn't matter": seemingly a clear example of someone who would choose to sell the gems.

However, on further reflection Kevin connects the dilemma to his own past experience playing driving game *Forza Motorsport 2*, in which you can create and sell your own cars: "Say I build a car in *Forza Motorsport 2* and that's like a really intricate car with a great system. And it didn't take me that long but it looks cool and the parts aren't really that great but I say it's really awesome and I sell it for a high amount of credits, that I wouldn't do, because that's like ripping someone off. If you take it in that context, which I know a lot about, then no, I wouldn't do it."

Here Kevin explicitly connects his experience in one game with the new situation in another, demonstrating his ability to reconceptualize the new situation in light of an old. Furthermore, Kevin's response shows which factors of the dilemma are ethically salient to him: his *Forza*

example stresses the dishonest nature of the imagined transaction. The car “looks cool”, but “the parts aren’t really great”—there is a disparity between appearance and reality (as with the pseudogems)—but Kevin would be maintaining that the car is “really awesome” despite the flaws he knows it has. Therefore, the proposed situation is “like ripping someone off”, even though initially Kevin had thought that “anything done in a game really doesn't matter”.

Peter’s reasoning is different: although he says “I don't really like scamming myself”, he would decide whether to sell the gems or not based on how easy it is to acquire currency within the particular game. In *Runescape* (a popular MMO) “there's an early quest where you get a lot of money. So, what the heck, I'll scam them.” But in *World of Warcraft* “I wouldn't scam them. That's hard to get money in that game. I wouldn't like scamming them. Especially new players. You couldn't even get any money.” For Peter, then, “it really depends on the economy” of the game in question whether he would sell the pseudogems.

This response is illuminating for two primary reasons. First, Peter recognizes that the sale of the pseudogems could be considered a “scam”, and declares himself generally to be against the practice. Thus, like Kevin, he sees that there is dishonesty involved in the putative transaction. However, his ethic seems more consequentialist than Kevin’s: if it is easy to generate currency within a particular game, then the harm of taking that currency from another player in a dishonest transaction is lessened, and therefore the act is more acceptable.

This further suggests that, were the conditions with the game to change, Peter might change his response to the situation. If, for instance, the makers of Runescape were to remove the early money-generating quest, player like Peter might be less inclined to engage in what they consider to be “scamming”.

Alice (22) gave a third set of reasons for her mixed response. She would sell the gems under only two conditions: first, if currency was necessary for the survival of her avatar ("if it was a matter of life or death, then I would sell the gems"); and second, if the individual purchasing the gems had done something to deserve being on the receiving end of the scam ("I would sell it to someone that was rude. Or an attitude that isn't right").

Like Peter, Alice is taking into consideration features of the gameworld, but while Peter is concerned with the availability of currency, Alice is concerned with how *necessary* currency is to succeed in the game. In addition to these concerns, Alice is willing to "punish" another player for rudeness or a bad attitude, suggesting a tit-for-tat mentality.

Emily introduced yet more factors when discussing her decision, saying

> It depends on if I was going to be long term gaming or short term. If this was a game that I was like…"Oh, this is just a current fad", I wouldn't mind making a quick buck and having as much fun with the game as I possibly could while I could. If it was something where I was really into the game and I was going to be a lifelong player, and I had already spent time building relationships, yeah, I wouldn't want to—because you never know. That person who was a beginner when you sold them the pseudo-gems might turn out to be the best player in the game and come back and…"

Clearly, Emily is thinking about the length of time she would be playing this particular game for: if it's just a short time, then she would happily sell the gems, but if it's a long time commitment, she would not. But why? Two reasons seem to stand out: first, Emily is concerned that some negative consequence might accrue to her in the future should she sell the gems: the scammed player might "come back and…" But, in addition, Emily values *relationships*. If she had

"already spent time building relationships" she would not want to jeopardize them by selling someone the gems.

These four examples represent an important finding in themselves: rich contextual considerations can come into play when people make quite routine decisions in an MMO space, and young people are capable of probing them. Collectively, Kevin, Peter, Alice and Emily think about their experience with other games, factors of the particular gameworld into which they project themselves for the purposes of discussing the dilemma, the actions of other players, potential consequences to themselves, and the effects of their actions on online relationships when making their decisions.

Community Vs. Competitive Modes of Thinking Possibly Related to Amount and Nature of Gaming Experience

The split between competitive and communal interpretations of the MMO space seems worthy of further exploration, since it may be significant that every participant who conceived of the gameworld as fundamentally competitive would sell the gems, while none of the participants who spoke about a *community* of players would do so. The dilemma, of course, gives no explicit details about the game, except that it houses around 30,000 players and that "Buying, selling and trading the equipment with other players is a fun and important part of the game." From this it can be extrapolated that some sort of communication between players must exist, and that peaceful trading between players is possible, but whether players are in direct competition with each other or not was left to the individual participant to decide. We might well ask, "What causes some individuals to construct the game as competitive, while others construct it as more cooperative?"

As mentioned in the Methods section, each individual who participated in this study was interviewed at length regarding their digital media usage in addition to the interviews in which this dilemma was presented. Therefore it is possible to use these "person-centered" interviews, in combination with the dilemma interviews, to examine the amount of experience an individual participant has had with online games, and to compare that with their conception of the MMO space.

This gives rise to an additional finding: it appears that those participants who refer to an the online space as a *community* have themselves had some experience with such a community. Kevin and his experience with *Forza Motorsport II* is surely an example, as is Frank, who speaks almost lovingly of the Free Internet Chess Server he frequents:

> "I play in a site called Free Internet Chess Server... And the thing that I like about it is it's an alternative to a larger pay site which is called ICC or Internet Chess Club. So, this one was made by computer programmers and it's just supposed to be for people who just love to play chess... They have news feeds to let you know what's going on in the world of chess. They have a couple of educational videos to teach you about different principles in chess. And then they have different admins and community organizers that help bridge the gap. Because if you don't know programming languages and stuff like that, then it could be kind of hard to play on this site… I love chess and I love the community aspect of it."

Steve, who also thought of the broader community, was an Ultima Online player, and Emily, too, had experience playing MMOs.

In contrast, those who took a more competitive view in general had either not played many online video games at all, or had played games in which one player competes with another to

achieve a set goal (not normally the setup of MMOs). Floyd (18), for example, describes himself as "a very strong gamer", but has played purely competitive multiplayer games, and never one which exists in a persistent world. Similarly Monica, who also displays a competitive mindset, is most familiar with the Grand Theft Auto series, which does not encourage interaction with a community of players, she describes: "if I'm playing *Grand Theft Auto*, I'm not playing to make friends with the locals, I'm playing so I can win". This final finding has implications for the ways in which games might be used to foster ethical development, which are explored below.

Discussion

The most significant element of our participants' responses is, perhaps, the prevalence of "it's just a game" response. That every participant who decided to sell the gems used this argument, at least as part of their reasoning, suggests that this may be a widespread and influential mode of thought among young people when considering ethical questions in MMOs (and perhaps other online spaces). The implicit reasoning that seems to underlie this response is as follows: because neither the game, the gems nor the currency are real, then no harm can come of the transaction, and therefore it is acceptable to sell the gems for whatever price you choose without informing the purchaser of their real value.

Indeed, the dilemma, under this conception, is not a dilemma at all—it is removed from the moral sphere entirely. Emily (21) seems to confirm this, saying "if it's just a game and there's no real money involved, no harm, no foul", as does Leila: "It's [a] 3D fake computer world…You know, it's not going to actually harm anybody. So, the dilemma kind of is removed. There are no morals to be considered there."

These participants' view of the MMO gameworld seems to dovetail with Powers' (2004): there are no expectations as to what constitute moral conduct, and the selling of the gems is technically possible, and therefore within the rules of the game. This is indeed a Hobbesian world in which those who do not like how the game is played should sit on the sidelines.

Why might this be so? Southern (2001) and Consalvo (2003) point to a possible answer: video games are often disparaged in the media and everyday parlance as culturally insignificant at best, and harmful at worst. As Southern (2001) argues, the very word "game" carries with it trivializing connotations: "The primary signifier of the signs 'Toy' or 'Game' might be 'object / method of play' - but the secondary level might also include images and concepts such as 'childhood', 'innocence', 'trivia', 'pleasure' and even 'waste of time'" (p. 3). Similarly, Consalvo (2003), in investigating how video games are discussed during media coverage of the second Gulf War, notes that the real harm of war was frequently contrasted with the sanitized world of videogames: "[the media] suggests that while war is about real human lives that occasionally are lost, videogames are not about 'real' human lives" (p. 4).

Doubtless, real warfare gives rise to moral and ethical dilemmas vast orders of magnitude larger than the one we posed to our participants in this study. However, it is perhaps not challenging to see how young people might get the message that "childlike", "innocent", "trivial" pursuits that are not "about real human lives" pose no moral problems.

The other works explored above (such as Reynolds (2007)), however, caution us regarding this view, reminding us that it is certainly possible for MMOs to have expectations of moral action *in addition* to the basic mechanical rules of play. This is what those who invoke the golden rule and

standards of fairness seem to recognize: selling the gems for an inflated price may be *possible* within the rules of the game, and may benefit your avatar, but may still be reprehensible.

These respondents seem to view their online interactions as fundamentally similar to their offline interactions, governed by the same principles and ideals. In this sense, they mirror Huff, Johnson and Miller's (2003) assertion that "The controllers of virtual characters have responsibilities for those consequences. These responsibilities are similar to those that real people have when they interact with other real people" (p. 17). Further support for this hypothesis is provided by Emily's response: she does not seem to make a significant ethical distinction between her offline and online relationships when considering the dilemma. This in turn lends weight to Cole and Griffiths' (2007) finding that players of online games consider their relationships with other players to be significant.

Given the seeming connection between experience of online communities and what we might call a "communitarian" response to the dilemma, we can perhaps surmise that those youth who gain experience with online communities might, in time, become more amenable to an approach to dilemmas like ours which considers the effects of their actions on a wider range of players than those directly involved in the transaction.

Implications

Educators and parents concerned about the implications of their charges' time spent playing MMOs might be inclined to feel concerned by the findings of this study: many of the young people we interviewed were happy to admit that they would indeed do something which many others would consider wrong. However, our findings do point to potential avenues for promoting ethical thinking and behavior in online worlds.

First, the seeming importance of involvement in online communities to the development of a wider scope of ethical concern suggests that engaging young people in activities which involve meaningful relationships with others online, in a broadly non-competitive context, might result in more youth realizing the potential effects of their online action on others. Rather than becoming *less* sensitized to the effects of their actions the more they play, our study suggests young people might become *more* sensitive, as long as they are engaged with a real online community like Frank's Free Internet Chess Server.

Second, the "mixed" responses given by six of our participants highlight the fact that young people are capable of weighing multiple contextual factors when making a judgment about how to act online, and that they can do so with an eye to how much or how little their actions might affect others in a particular online space. We may want to encourage adults, then, to be equally nuanced and informed regarding our judgments about the ethics of young people's online activities: if we ourselves are unaware of the norms of an online space in which youth are operating, we may not be in an ideal position to guide them.

Third, we may wish to tone-down our denunciation of online play as "just a game". While we may send out this message with the best of intentions, it might encourage youth to think of their interactions with others online as insignificant and void of ethical import. By engaging with online games as worthwhile and impactful activities—by affording them a certain significance—we may encourage youth to take their moral responsibilities in such spaces more seriously.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of 27 in-depth interviews with Boston-area youth, a number of avenues both for future research and educational practice have been opened. First, the lengthy nature of

the interviews has revealed significant nuance and richness in youth's responses to dilemmas such as these. Some young people in our study frequently considered multiple factors when thinking through the problem, such as the specific nature of the game they imagined playing, their relationships with other characters, and the role more experience players should play when interacting with less experience players. Others conceived of games as simply for fun and devoid of moral or ethical considerations. Future research in this area should take into consideration the broad range of factors which may play into decision making in such a scenario, or may miss crucial variables.

Second, the majority of our participants, opting to sell the gems, did so because they saw no harm in it, either because they felt that action within a virtual world was incapable of harming others, or because they considered the gameworld to be essentially competitive. If the consensus in the scholarly literature is correct, and real harm *can* be caused by virtual acts, then educators should take note: the majority of the young people in our study did not consider this possibility. However, as we have also seen, it may be that with more experience in an online world, young people can develop a sense of how their actions might affect others, even if they are only represented by avatars.

Finally, it may be that the ability to enforce meaningful consequences for acts deemed immoral is attenuated in online spaces—very few of our participants, at least, were motivated much by fear of negative consequences. Again, if real wrongs can stem from virtual acts, this may cause a problem. Educators and designers of online spaces may well wish to consider how they can foster responsible moral communities in the absence of effective consequence mechanisms.

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